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One Sea, Two Songs

Chris Heard

Most of us do not experience life as a musical. Flash mobs notwithstanding, rarely do many of us break out into full-fledged song-and-dance numbers, at least in public. Occasionally, however, episodes in the Bible read like musicals, with the characters pausing for song. The “Song of the Sea,” more prosaically known as Exodus 15.1b–18, surely ranks as one of the best-known musical interludes embedded in biblical narrative. Therefore, it comes as no surprise when DreamWorks’s animated film *The Prince of Egypt*—itself a musical, like most animated films from DreamWorks and Disney—concludes with a big musical number, “When You Believe,” as the Israelites pass from Egypt through the sea into the Sinai wilderness. But how do these two songs compare? A disclaimer at the beginning of *The Prince of Egypt* asserts that “[w]hile artistic and historical license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values, and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide.” Judging by the biblical “Song of the Sea” and the film’s “When You Believe,” did the filmmakers succeed? Does “When You Believe” reflect the “essence” and “values” of the biblical “Song of the Sea”?

Moses’ “Song of the Sea” celebrates the power God has shown by defeating the Egyptian army. Were the “Song of the Sea” to stand alone, outside of its narrative context, still no reader could mistake the song’s overt references to a victory in which God threw Egyptian chariots into the sea (Exod 15.1, 4) or the central idea that God alone has secured this victory. Divine action defeated Pharaoh’s armies; accordingly, divine action dominates this song. Admittedly, the author of the book of Exodus has exercised some “artistic and historical license” of his own by placing this song in Moses’ mouth, despite the fact that verses 13–17 leave little doubt that the poem originated well after the Israelite settlement in Canaan.¹ But the poet keeps the camera focused squarely on God.

The apparent absence of God from “When You Believe” forms a striking contrast with the “Song of the Sea,” although here one must remain aware of three different versions of “When You Believe.”² The version that accompanies the film’s exodus scene does mention God—but only in the song’s bridge, sung by children in Hebrew.

1. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Westminster: John Knox Press, 1974), 251–252). Childs rightly rejects the suggestion by “[c]ertain older commentators” that vv. 13–18 were added to the poem long after the composition of vv. 1b–12. The parallelism between the Egyptians sinking into the Sea “like a stone” (v. 5) and the Canaanite leaders standing still “as a stone” (v. 16) is the most obvious of several features that commend vv. 1b–18 as a unified composition. While Carol Meyers sounds judicious warnings about assuming that the “sanctuary” of v. 17 must be the temple in Jerusalem, she nevertheless glosses over the undeniable fact that conflict with the Edomites, Moabites, Canaanites and Philistines belongs to Israel’s post-Sinai wilderness experience (as narrated in the Torah), and the poet clearly places those experiences in the past (especially in v. 16). See Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary Series; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 120–121.

2. We find similar phenomena in the Bible, such as the slight divergences between the Ten Commandments as given in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

Ashira l'adonai, ki ga'oh ga'ah!
 Ashira l'adonai, ki ga'oh ga'ah!
 Mi kamoka ba'elim, adonai?
 Mi kamoka nedar bakodesh?
 Nachita b'chasdika am zu ga'alta!³
 Nachita b'chasdika am zu ga'alta!
 Ashira, ashira, ashira ...

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!
 I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!
 Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
 Who is like you, majestic in holiness?
 In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed!
 In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed!
 I will sing, I will sing, I will sing ...

The bridge quotes from Exodus 15.1b, 11a–b, and 13a—making this brief moment, in one sense, the film's most “literal” adaptation of the biblical story. However, relatively few viewers of *The Prince of Egypt* will understand the Hebrew words, and having them sung by children may imply that they represent a less mature understanding than that voiced by the adults, Miriam (Sally Dworsky) and Zipporah (Michelle Pfeiffer).⁴

Those adults, singing in a language that most of the audience will understand, have nothing to say about God. This omission contrasts not only with the biblical “Song of the Sea,” but with the beginning of *The Prince of Egypt* itself. The film opens with the Hebrew slaves singing,

With the sting of the whip on my shoulder,
 with the salt of my sweat on my brow—
 Elohim, God on high,
 can you hear your people cry?
 Help us now, this dark hour!

Deliver us! Hear our call!
 Deliver us! Lord of all—
 remember us, here in this burning sand!
 Deliver us!
 There's a land you promised us—
 Deliver us to the promised land!

This lament coheres quite well with the biblical “Song of the Sea.” The film's slaves want God to deliver them from Egypt to the promised land; the “Song of the Sea” praises God for doing exactly that. “Deliver Us” almost seems to flesh out Exodus 2.23 by transforming into a lament the praise found in Exodus 15.1b–18.

Miriam and Zipporah have not forgotten about the Israelites' cries for help, of course. “When You Believe” acknowledges the slaves' prayers, but downplays divine power for a focus on human faith. As the exodus begins, Miriam sings:

3. Pronounce each *ch* like a *k*, as in *Chris*.

4. Sandra Bullock provided Miriam's speaking voice; Sally Dworsky sang Miriam's musical lines.

Many nights we've prayed,
with no proof anyone could hear—
in our hearts a hopeful song
we barely understood.
Now we are not afraid,
although we know there's much to fear.
We were moving mountains long before we knew we could!

After the chorus, Zipporah adds:

In this time of fear,
when prayer so often proved in vain,
hope seemed like the summer birds
too swiftly flown away.
Yet now I'm standing here
with heart so full I can't explain,
seeking faith and speaking words
I never thought I'd say.

Miriam and Zipporah sing the second chorus as a duet:

There can be miracles
when you believe.
Though hope is frail,
it's hard to kill.
Who knows what miracles
you can achieve
when you believe?
Somehow you will,
you will when you believe.

In both the Bible and *The Prince of Egypt*, the exodus itself stands as proof that someone did in fact hear the slaves' prayers that the Hebrews did not pray in vain. Yet the film's last big song does not acknowledge this. Instead, "When You Believe" focuses on the miracles that *you* can allegedly do when *you* believe—not on what God has done or can do.

The fact that "When You Believe" commences *before* the crossing of the sea and the "Song of the Sea" commences *after* the crossing of the sea may explain some of the difference in focus. In the film, "When You Believe" seems to lay a foundation that encourages Moses to act when trapped between the Egyptians and the sea. At the critical moment, Moses remembers God telling him (at the burning bush), "With this staff, you will do my wonders"—the film's version of Exodus 4.17. Perhaps buoyed by Miriam and Zipporah's song, Moses parts the sea. In this context, charitable viewers might gloss "When You Believe" as a message to Moses to believe God's statement about the staff. Attentive viewers might also notice that the sea walls begin to collapse with no action from Moses, and that several Israelites stand with hands raised in a posture of prayer as Moses gazes back across the stilling sea toward Rameses and Egypt. Moreover, a full choir now sings the Hebrew bridge from "When You Believe" and the score blends the music of "When You Believe" with the film's overtly theological opening song, "Deliver Us." Those with eyes to see and ears to hear will therefore perceive God's hand behind these events, despite the absence of God's name from "When You Believe."⁵

5. Here we might compare the experience of reading the book of Esther, which (in its Hebrew version) does not mention God, but nevertheless seems to advance a theology of divine providence.

To accomplish the interpretive maneuvers just described, however, viewers must gloss over the relentless emphasis that “When You Believe” places on human ability. In the two English verses, twelve of the fifteen verbs take *I*, *we* or *you* as the subject. In these sentences, people pray, barely understand, are not afraid, know, move mountains, stand, can’t explain (their feelings), seek, and speak. In the chorus (repeated three times in the Dworsky-Pfeiffer duet), people believe and achieve. *Hope* is the subject of two verbs in the chorus, where hope is frail but hard to kill, and one in the second (Zipporah’s) verse, where it “seemed like the summer birds / too swiftly flown away.” In the chorus, *miracles* are the subject of “can be” (i.e., “can happen”) but only “when you believe.” This leaves precious little room, grammatically, for divine activity. By inference, God seems to be the “anyone” in the first (Miriam’s) verse who offers no proof of hearing the singer’s prayers; in the second verse, *prayer* proves to be in vain. The song’s English verbs simply leave no room for God to do anything but fail.

As soon as the credits begin to roll, viewers hear another version of “When You Believe,” this one sung by Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. Here, the Hebrew bridge—the only part of the song to mention God or to credit God with any accomplishments—is replaced by another bridge.

They⁶ don’t (always happen) when you ask,
and it’s easy to give in to your fears,
but when you’re blinded by your pain,
can’t see your way straight through the rain,
a small but still resilient voice
says hope is very near.

Listeners familiar with the prophet Elijah may try to perceive God’s presence in the “small but resilient voice,” but to do so bucks the trend of the entire song. Indeed, this version of the song asserts that miracles “don’t always happen when you ask,” but “there can be miracles when you believe.” The Carey-Houston version of “When You Believe” thus implies that your own faith can pick up the slack when God fails to answer your prayers. The version of “When You Believe” featured on the television talent show *X-Factor* in 2007 make these implications explicit, replacing the second verse of the Carey-Houston version with.

Easy to despair
when all you hear is fear and lies,
easy to just run and hide,
too frightened to begin.
But if we dare to dare,
don’t wait for answers from the skies,
each of us can look inside
and hear this song within ...

In this version, God’s role in achieving miracles is not merely cloaked in Hebrew (as in the movie version) or subtly suppressed (as in the credits version) but actively denied.

One could hardly create a more striking contrast than the biblical “Song of the Sea” implies. In the biblical song, the singer stands as the subject of very few verbs, and those are *sing*, *praise* and *exalt* (vv. 1b–2) with God as the direct object. Other people—Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and other neighboring peoples—are the subjects of verbs that name fear and failure. God alone stands in the “Song of the Sea” as the subject of active verbs describing significant achievements, most notably throwing Pharaoh and his forces into the sea (vv. 1, 4) and leading the Israelites through the wilderness (v. 13), resulting in the terror felt by nearby nations (vv. 14–16). The human role in the “Song of the Sea” is to acknowledge God’s achievements. This theme runs

6. That is, miracles.

throughout the exodus story. Even before the ten plagues begin, God tells Moses, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.... The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them” (Exod 7.3, 5). After the plagues, as the Israelites camp near the sea, God tells Moses, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord” (Exod 14.4). When their chariots began to get bogged down in the seabed, the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt” (Exod 14.25). When “Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians...the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (Exod 14.31).

From beginning to end, the biblical “Song of the Sea” glorifies God. The song that accompanies the ten plagues in *The Prince of Egypt* (called simply “The Plagues” on the soundtrack album) does a marvelous job of pitting God and Pharaoh against each other, with the repeated phrase “thus says the Lord” emphasizing their rival claims to power. God, of course, wins this contest—which makes it all the more disappointing that the climactic song following the tenth plague focuses entirely on human believing as the catalyst for miracles.

Setting aside the *X Factor* version of “When You Believe,” could a more charitable listener find greater consistency between the song and the Bible by choosing a point of comparison other than the “Song of the Sea”? Many Christian listeners will recognize the first verse’s line about “moving mountains” as an allusion to Matthew 21.21–22. Christians might also wish to connect “When You Believe” to other New Testament affirmations of the importance of faith, such as Matthew 9.20–22 and 15.21–28 or James 5.13–18. Careful attention to these passages, however, yields a very different understanding of faith than does careful attention to “When You Believe.” The gospel passages cited above make the point particularly well. The hemorrhaging woman of Matthew 9.20–22 and the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15.21–28 did not find healing by believing that they would get well; they found healing by believing that Jesus could make them well. Even Matthew 21.21–22 and James 5.13–18 do not really approach the song’s understanding of belief’s miraculous potential, for the results envisioned in these passages result from answered prayer, the indirect fruit of faith. Indeed, I venture to claim that no biblical author, not even James, believes in the “power of prayer” or the “power of faith” as a quasi-mechanical miraculous force. Power resides not in prayer, belief or faith as such, but in the God to whom faithful believers pray.

And so, as the last song in the storyline of *The Prince of Egypt* and the first song to play under the credits, “When You Believe” disappoints. It disappoints viewers who paid attention to “Deliver Us” at the very beginning of the film, because it makes the Israelites seem like ingrates who attribute their deliverance to their own believing rather than to the God addressed so plaintively in the opening song. For the same reason, it disappoints viewers who paid attention to the plague sequence and its accompanying song, which effectively pits Pharaoh’s impotence against God’s power (albeit channeled through Moses). Most of all, it disappoints viewers familiar with the “Song of the Sea”—in whose eyes “When You Believe” is, at best, an aesthetically moving exercise in missing the point. The “essence and values” of “When You Believe” consist in a celebration of the power of human resilience and determination—a far cry from the “essence and values” of the “Song of the Sea” and of the exodus story as a whole. “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.”

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